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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SINGAPORE 001986

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SOCI](#) [SN](#)

SUBJECT: PROMOTING MAINSTREAM ISLAM: THE SINGAPORE MODEL

REF: A. SINGAPORE 1835

[1](#)B. SINGAPORE 887

Classified By: E/P Counselor Laurent Charbonnet, Reasons 1.4(b)(d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Concerned about the potential threat of Islamic extremism to Singapore's multi-religious, secular society, the government of Singapore (GOS) is promoting its brand of "mainstream" Islam and a Singaporean Muslim identity. Using its standard tools of incentives, co-optation, and control, the GOS seeks to ensure Singapore's social cohesion and security by providing an ideological alternative to Islamic extremism. Working primarily through the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), a government statutory board, the GOS aims to convince Muslims that Islam is compatible with modernity, and to harness religion to ensure their support for (or at least acquiescence to) its policies. End summary.

A Nation that Feels at Risk

[1](#)2. (C) Flanked by two Malay/Muslim-majority nations, and having experienced race riots in the 1960s, the GOS has long been obsessed with promoting racial harmony and winning the loyalty of the city-state's indigenous Malay/Muslim minority (15 percent of the population). These efforts have taken on new urgency since 9/11, the subsequent discovery in December 2001 of a bombing plot by Singaporean Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorists, and multiple bombings in nearby Indonesia. Singapore's Chinese-dominated leadership worries about the impact of a global Islamic resurgence on its Muslim citizens, be it social fissures, independent political movements, or acts of terrorism.

Creating a Singapore Muslim Identity

[1](#)3. (C) To counter this perceived threat, the GOS, working through modernist Muslim political and religious leaders, is promoting what it calls "mainstream" ("sederhana") Islam in Malay and working to create a unique Singapore Muslim identity. MUIS has articulated ten attributes of the ideal Singapore Muslim, most of which emphasize acceptance of the existing social and political order, such as "Well-adjusted in living as full members of secular society," and "Believes that a good Muslim is also a good citizen." Other attributes support the government's goal of maintaining racial harmony in Singapore's diverse society, such as "Inclusive and practices pluralism," is "a blessing to other communities," and "appreciates the richness of other civilizations." (The full list is available at the MUIS website, [www.muis.gov.sg](#).)

Broadcasting "Progressive" Ideas

[1](#)4. (C) MUIS is promulgating "progressive" Islamic views rather than allowing a vacuum to develop that could be filled by radical Islamic ideas. The official weekly sermons issued by MUIS for use in all the city-state's mosques urge Muslims to work towards improving themselves and their community, and to avoid violent extremism. Singapore's government-appointed Mufti (supreme Islamic religious authority), in consultation with a committee of religious scholars, issues fatwas (religious opinions) that support the government's goals. MUIS is also reforming Singapore's Islamic education system to provide Muslims with "proper" religious knowledge (ref A), the absence of which, it believes, allowed terrorist ringleaders to lead astray the local JI plotters.

[1](#)5. (C) MUIS and other government-linked organizations also are bringing in well-known Muslim speakers to challenge--on a religious basis--radical Islamist arguments on issues such as jihad and the creation of a pan-Islamic state. MUIS is especially trying to bring in modernist Arabic-speaking scholars to meet with more traditional Muslim clerics, who are uncomfortable with English. Singapore's modernist Muslim leaders, including the Minister in charge of Muslim affairs, typically attended national schools (in English) rather than Islamic religious schools (where classes are in Arabic and Malay), and have degrees in secular subjects. As a result, they told us they do not feel they have the religious knowledge or language skills to successfully counter the

theological views of Singapore's more traditional Islamic leaders. This approach of importing experts is not completely successful; these modernist scholars are often challenged by traditional clerics, either directly at the talks or in articles on the website (www.pergas.org.sg) of the most conservative Muslim group, the Muslim Religious Teachers Association of Singapore (PERGAS).

Excluding Extremist or Critical Views

16. (C) The GOS tries to exclude voices that might foment religious divisions or encourage Muslims to challenge the government. Speeches on religion still require a permit, and can only be made in one of the four official languages (English, Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil), effectively preventing speeches in Arabic about Islam or politics. The GOS monitors visiting Muslim clerics and denies visas to those it deems a threat. It particularly restricts those from Saudi Arabia. While more open to their visits, the GOS also is concerned that clerics from Indonesia and Malaysia have been coming to Singapore and meeting with local religious leaders, according to the head of the GOS Political Islam Study Group. The GOS bans satellite dishes and controls which foreign channels are included in the cable TV lineup; Al Jazeera is one of the many channels not available in Singapore.

17. (C) The GOS tries to downplay news that might enflame its Muslim minority and to publish stories that support "progressive" Islamic views in the local media. The Malay-language newspaper's coverage of the allegations of Koran desecration at Guantanamo, for example, was considerably less critical than in the English-language newspapers. The editor of Singapore's Malay-language newspaper told us he was reprimanded by government officials for publishing an article that allegedly threatened racial harmony.

Monitoring Potential Critics...

18. (C) The GOS monitors the Muslim community to squelch extremist or critical views. The GOS relies not just on the police and intelligence services, but also on religious and community leaders for self-policing. Muslims MPs told us members of the community will report to them when Islamic clerics deviate from the official Friday sermon, and MUIS officials will then remind the imam to deliver the prepared text. MUIS monitors the views and activities of other Muslim groups. For example, a few years ago the Deputy Mufti publicly resigned his post--because of differences with the MUIS leadership, according to newspaper accounts--and went to work for PERGAS, from whence he provided MUIS with information about the group's views and tried to influence the traditional clerics to become less insular.

19. (C) Many Muslim journalists and community leaders have told us that this monitoring makes them reluctant to criticize the government. They fear government reprisals, such as a defamation suit or detention under Singapore's Internal Security Act (ISA) for fomenting racial tension. The immediate past-president of MUIS told us that he feared being "blacklisted" after he argued at a closed-door session that the GOS deters Muslim challenges to the government by keeping the Muslim elite busy with social welfare work; a listener reported his comments to the GOS, which then "requested" a written text of his presentation.

...And Co-opting Them, As Well

110. (C) The GOS tries to co-opt Muslims critical of its policies through incentives. MUIS, for example, now provides cash-strapped PERGAS with office space. The Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP), which was initially critical of the GOS and PAP Muslim leaders, now receives part of the mandatory payroll deductions from Muslims' salaries (the government-administered "zakat") to fund its social service programs. AMP's president told us this has had made AMP more reluctant to publicly challenge government policies.

111. (U) The GOS seems so far to have earned the tacit acceptance of most Singaporean Muslims by accommodating their religious practices and beliefs. Singapore allows Muslim family law (Syariah), for example, and has a system of Syariah courts to administer it. According to a judge on the Syariah court, secular lawyers who are Muslims work with the Muslim religious judges to craft opinions that harmonize the religious ruling with Singapore's civil code. Singapore's Muslims can easily find MUIS-certified halal food (including at McDonalds), wear Islamic or traditional Malay clothing (except for students in the national schools, who must wear the school uniform), and invest in Islamic financial products. Muslim holidays such as Idul Fitri are national holidays. Even PERGAS concedes that while an Islamic state

is the ideal, it is acceptable to live under a secular government such as Singapore's that allows Muslims to live in accordance with Islamic teachings.

12. (U) The GOS hinders the development of Muslim opposition through its conciliatory actions on foreign policy and security issues. The GOS carefully explained the arrests of the suspected Jemaah Islamiyah terrorists to the Muslim community. It is treating the JI detainees well, focusing on reeducating them with "proper Islamic knowledge" (provided by volunteer Islamic religious teachers) and is co-operating with the Muslim community to ensure the detainees' families are well-treated, according to both GOS officials and Muslim leaders. The GOS is also accommodating the foreign policy priorities of its Muslim minority by reaching out to the Middle East (ref B) and by urging the United States to deal evenly with the Palestinians.

Insulating Politics from Religion and Race

13. (C) The GOS tries to separate politics from race and religion. Parliamentary districts are drawn so that Muslims are a minority in every district, but, in partial compensation, electoral rules require parties to have a minority candidate on the election slate of most constituencies. Race and religion are two topics that remain "out of bounds" for political discussion. The GOS typically reprimands religious groups who intrude in the political sphere, although it did allow them to publicly express their views on the question of whether to allow a casino to be built in Singapore. Singapore's Malay political party (PKMS), which is informally affiliated with UMNO in Malaysia and seems to have some allies on the governing board of PERGAS, occasionally tries to use religion and race for political purposes, such as calling for the next president of Singapore to be Malay.

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Promoting Social Cohesion and Religious Harmony
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14. (U) The GOS is concerned about Muslims segregating themselves from the larger society. It is trying to "enlarge the common space" in which Singaporeans of all races and religions interact through voluntary activities such as sports, and mandatory regulations such as racial quotas for public housing (home to 85% of Singaporeans). Since 9/11 and the arrests of the suspected Jemaah Islamiyah terrorists, the GOS has stepped up its efforts to promote social cohesion. It is encouraging interactions among members of different faiths through newly formed groups like the Inter-Religious Organization (IRO) and inter-racial confidence circles. The GOS has also written a declaration of religious harmony, which is recited annually on Racial Harmony Day.

15. (C) Comment: This GOS effort to promote its version of "progressive" Islam that supports the existing social and political order is an example of the PAP government's top-down social engineering. This approach seeks to ensure the PAP's continued dominance, while simultaneously providing for a stable society and preventing the incursion of radicalized views from Muslim communities abroad. By promoting an Islamic ideology that is compatible with economic development, commerce, and modernity, the PAP hopes to convince Singapore's Muslim community to accept its vision of Singapore as a diverse, secular state. End Comment.

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